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## CLASS CRITICISM AS A MEANS OF TEACHING ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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Class criticism, or the criticism by pupils of their classmates' themes, when properly conducted, is an exercise whose possibilities of usefulness are not generally appreciated. Of course, it must be said at the outset that to make pupils' criticisms of value, the teacher must first have laid a substantial foundation by his own criticisms. Only after the members of the class have thus learned by observation something of the method of the critic, are they ready to imitate it. Therefore, this work is of but slight utility before the second year in the high school. Though at no period should class criticism supersede altogether the teacher's correction, yet after the first year it may both supplement and lighten his labors.

Such an exercise may be conducted as follows: Pupils bring to class their finished compositions written in ink. They are ignorant whether these particular papers are to be criticised by the teacher or by the class. The themes are collected and redistributed so that each scholar receives another's composition. Each then writes, on a clean sheet of paper, the heading "Criticism of ——'s paper on ——," filling out the blanks properly. Next, they are required to read carefully the themes given them, and to answer fully on their criticism sheets a set of questions which the teacher has put upon the board. The last direction is: Reread and mark in pencil with the customary signs all the errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, sentence-structure, paragraphing, and the choice of words. The criticism and correction usually occupy the whole of a forty-minute period. Variety is sometimes introduced by substituting for the written criticism oral or board correction of such errors as can readily be understood. When the hour is over, the papers with the sheets of criticisms are returned to the author, either directly or indirectly, after a more or less cursory inspection by the teacher. Usually sufficient knowledge of the

quantity and quality of each pupil's work is afforded the teacher as he passes among them. When pupils receive their criticised papers, they revise them in accordance with the suggestions of their critics, and then submit the second draft to the teacher. In this revised composition he finds that the process of criticism and revision has eliminated from one-half to two-thirds of the mistakes that shout for correction in a first draft—and these the most dreary.

Experience in such work has proved the value of the following points:

1. The papers should be read at least twice by the critics: the first time for criticism of the thought and structure of the whole; the second time for marking the mechanical errors, faulty sentences, and poor paragraphs. The advantage of saving the correction of details till the last are: the greater importance of the thought and structure of the whole is thus emphasized; the lazy cannot escape questions that require thought with the excuse that they "didn't get to them;" many mistakes to which the interest of the first reading makes the critic blind will not be overlooked at the second reading.

2. Definite questions must be supplied the class, if the criticisms are to be helpful and specific. Boys and girls do not know what to look for, and must be directed. Specimen questions that have been used are: "Is the theme interesting? Give a reason for your answer. Does the writer get under way at once, or waste words? Does he stick to his subject? Point out any digressions. Can this essay be improved anywhere by expansion, or condensation? Are the sentences anywhere too long, or too short and jerky? Rewrite all that you can improve. Are any words, phrases, or constructions repeated so often as to be monotonous? What are the best and the worst points of this paper? Is it good enough to read to the class?"

3. The class should be made to understand that not mere destructive fault-finding, but criticism embracing suggestions for improvement, is what is wanted; that praise is to be given where deserved, and there only; and that general criticism such as, "He repeats words too much," is almost worthless compared with specific comment like, "He has used 'then' six times on his first page."

4. Questions should be varied, graded to correspond with the progress of the class, and fitted to the particular kind of writing which it is attacking. Thus, for a story, appropriate questions are:

“Does the introduction give the time, the place, and the persons? Does it arouse interest at once? Does the interest increase up to the climax? Is the climax strong, yet natural? Does the ending come soon enough? Are there any inconsistencies or improbabilities? Are the conversations natural? Does the writer make you *see* the persons and places described?”

5. Of course, pupils must feel that this exercise is a serious one, upon which they may be marked for their thought and discrimination.

6. Of the utmost importance is the teacher's active participation in the work. As he passes about the room, observing the critics, here answering a question and there giving a suggestion, in talking with individuals, he should shame the careless, spur the sluggish, and help the struggling.

Though this method has now many adherents, there have not been wanting objections. Of these the chief are three: that it is the resource of the lazy teacher who shunts his work off upon his class; that pupils' criticisms are of little value, and that, therefore, this method is a waste of time; that it is not the business of the school to teach criticism. Let us see what can be said in defence.

First, if there be any lazy teachers who have fallen by mistake into teaching English, they will not be found enthusiastic in regard to class criticism. In itself, this exercise demands not only careful preparation, but also, as the teacher supervises the critics, the rapid adjustment of his mind to twenty or thirty different personalities and points of view in as many minutes—a species of mental gymnastics which is exhausting. Furthermore, as has been said, class criticism depends for its success upon the teacher's previous and contemporaneous criticism. However, much of the drudgery of elementary correction, which does not require the expert and which dulls his powers, being performed by less skilled hands, something of the precious time and strength of the teacher, the skilled craftsman, is saved for higher work, involving less waste of power. Hence, though the criticism of the class does relieve the teacher from a large part of the burden of mechanical correction, it demands as a substitute labor which, though less deadening, is no less difficult. Instead of lessening labor for the lazy, as is charged, it makes the same labor more effective—economizes energy.

To the objection that pupil's criticisms are worthless, the best reply is: Try and see. Fair trial has won over many skeptics. The following comments, which different boys and girls in the first half of the second year in the McKinley High School of St. Louis have made upon one another's stories, may be submitted as fair samples.

"This story begins too abruptly. There isn't enough introduction." "In the introduction he doesn't describe the people, the place, or the time." "The introduction speaks of things which are not important enough in the story afterward." "The introduction is so fine that the remainder is lacking in spirit and the interest seems to decrease." "In the second and third paragraphs on page 7 there are two distinct points of view. [Of a description.] The conversation is very natural, and the contrasting descriptions of the two Americans are particularly interesting." "The story is well connected, and the interest increases, and is held to the end." "The interest does not increase on account of his giving the plot in the body, which should have been kept till the climax." "There are breaks in the connection [i. e., abrupt transition], namely, page 4, first paragraph; page 5, paragraph beginning 'the waiter'; page 6, from 'the law' to 'well.'" "More proof of their [that of two prisoners accused of planning a murder] innocence is necessary before they could be dismissed." "The climax is not strong, because the hints are so strong in certain parts of the story as to enable one to foresee it." "The climax is not strong, because the Americans jump to conclusions too quickly. This could be avoided by giving the waiter's testimony before the climax." "There is a variety in the words used which makes it more interesting." "There is a slight attempt in some places to use too big words."

However, whether or not those criticised derive from the criticisms and the marking of mechanical errors a benefit commensurate with the time spent, the practice in detecting and remedying faults is of tremendous value to the critics. The power that these gain from examining others' work soon makes them sensitive to their own blunders. Can a device that aids pupils to find their own mistakes be called worthless?

The question whether it is the function of the school to give instruction in criticism turns, like most educational questions, upon the definition of the term under discussion. If by "criticism" is meant *aesthetics*, criticism is assuredly beyond the province of the high school. But no pretence is here made of teaching *aesthetics*. The criticism referred to in this article is simply the application of the laws of correct, clear, and effective writing. Who will affirm that it is not the duty of the school to enable pupils to distinguish

between the slovenly and the careful, the clumsy and the skilful composition?

Formidable though they seem at first glance, these common objections to class criticism do not stand careful examination. This exercise has been planned, not for the purpose of saving the teacher labor, but for making his labor more effective; pupils' criticisms are not only not worthless to those criticised, but are also especially valuable to the critics; and the kind of criticism taught is not at all abstruse, but the most simple and practical possible.

Moreover, the elements which compose this exercise are sound in theory. The principal that education should lead pupils to think and work for themselves has been generally accepted since promulgated by Herbert Spencer. Of the efficiency of child-helpers, Pestalozzi speaks strongly in his account of his experience at Stanz. The value of learning by doing is now almost universally granted. Thus, class criticism which combines in one process self-development, mutual help, and actual performance is in accord with pedagogical thought.

However, the strongest testimony in favor of this exercise is that of experience, which shows the following benefits. First, "the judgment of their peers" makes a much stronger impression upon pupils than anything said by a teacher. The standards of the teacher, they think, are too artificial, exalted; he expects too much; but the condemnation of a classmate must be deserved. The poorer pupils are not only thus spurred by the comments of their fellow-students, but, when themselves asked to examine the work of the best, are also inspired to emulation. Their eyes are opened to their own possibilities. One teacher applies an even sharper stimulus by directing a strong pupil to rewrite entirely the weak paper of another, returning both to the weaker pupil.

Again, the removal by the class of much of the drudgery of correction enables the teacher to examine more papers. Furthermore, pupils are encouraged to more earnest effort by the knowledge that every paper will be read by somebody. Thus, the object of writing: to convey the writer's thought to a reader, is satisfied, and the process is complete.

That genuine interest is infused into the composition period by this method is shown in the pupil's zest and enthusiasm.

Fourthly, class criticism compels pupils to master principles by practice in applying them, while, on the other hand, it reveals to the teacher how thoroughly his instruction has been assimilated, and shows him what practical problems are perplexing his class.

Furthermore, many of the elements of structure that are often taught by the analysis of books can be as well illustrated by the analysis of pupils' efforts. Thus, the picking to pieces of students' papers is substituted for the deplorable dissection of pieces of literature.

On the other hand, power gained to apply simple standards of judgment to the efforts of immaturity may be used also to apply the same standards to the works of maturity. So, unconsciously, the pupil gains in literary taste and discrimination. Nowadays, when so much trash is being devoured by the rising generation, can this be counted a small benefit?

Last, and greatest of all, in the practice of criticising one another's papers, students develop self-reliance that renders them upon graduation capable of making progress, independent of teachers, through self-criticism.